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_Telling stories in book clubs_ offers a refreshing take on the professional development of novice and experienced teachers in an accessible style, appropriate to a broad audience, such as teachers, teacher educators, researchers and pre-service teachers. Throughout the text, Kooy demonstrates how she has worked alongside teachers to conduct research in a collaborative fashion indeed the voices of individual teachers ring authentically as issues of identity, gender and pedagogy are introduced. By cleverly combining the theme of ongoing professional learning with reading discussion groups, from a feminist perspective, Kooy presents a rich ethnographic study from two book clubs, composed of small groups of practising teachers. Insights offered through the individual voices of teachers, interwoven with the researcher’s reflective comments create an in-depth and lively analysis of book clubs, a popular practice which has traditionally been confined to the realms of women’s leisure activities and often neglected by mainstream educational research.

To clearly contextualize the study in the North American setting, Kooy points to factors such as decreasing school budgets, increasing class sizes and escalating efforts to improve student results in relation to standardized assessment. Played out through educational policies and practices, parental pressure and media reporting, these types of social and cultural factors are viewed as complex and continually changing. In the current pressurized era of reporting and assessment, teachers’ survival, argues Kooy, often involves necessary compliance through technical implementation of new mandated standards. The pressure to comply with protocols, observes Kooy, leads to loss of teachers’ independence and presents long-term challenges for the profession, such as attracting future teachers and retaining experienced teachers (see also Clark. 2001: Croasmun, Hampton, & Herrmann, 1997).

_Telling stories in book clubs_ is underpinned by a social constructivist framework, with Kooy drawing heavily on the work of theorists such as Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Rogoff. In particular, Kooy interprets the concept of a community of learners (Rogoff. 1994) as providing shared experiences for the teachers participating in these voluntary book clubs. As the group members develop relationships and learn to trust each other over time, the community of learners represents a supportive structure which allows the participating
teachers to discuss and redirect external pressures. As the community of learners develops, Kooy appropriately employs the narrative as a method to present the compelling stories of individual teachers. Both novice and experienced teachers reflect profoundly on self-selected novels and link textual elements, such as characterization and gender, to predominant features of classroom practice, such as behaviour management, lesson planning and assessment.

With a foreword written by Jo Anne Pagano, the structure of *Telling stories in book clubs* includes 10 chapters. Chapter 1 provides the background to the research and sets the tone for the text, which focuses on women’s reading, teaching and learning, with particular reference to pre-service teachers and practising teachers. The next four chapters explain the theoretical and methodological framework that informed the study. Chapters 6 through 9 relate the discussions and stories from the book club meetings and focus on the analysis of several novels, such as Kent Haruf’s *Plainsong* and Ernest J. Gaines’s *A lesson before dying*. Summarizing the conclusions of the study, Chapter 10 illuminates the voices of the women teachers to relate vivid stories from a perspective of professional learning.

Kooy draws two main conclusions, which make for salient reading and provide food for thought about future research in the area of book clubs as they relate to teaching. First, the social practice of book clubs can be used for innovation in the areas of pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development. By creating safe havens to discuss and reflect not only on literature, but also on classroom practice, book clubs can offer multiple opportunities for supporting both pre-service and experienced teachers. Such supportive networks can provide teacher-driven alternatives to the popular ‘one-off professional development formats, which focus on delivery by ‘experts’ in schools. Second, because these book clubs were formed and sustained only by women members, the role of gender within the study cannot be understated. Skillfully presenting the issue of female teachers under themes such as women’s work, caring and mothering, Kooy drives home the broader issue of women teachers in elementary and secondary schools being distanced from critical reflection and academic research.
References


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